

THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD DAY OF PRAYER

Most of you may know this as the Women's World Day of Prayer (see later!)

This story is an example of the slow and inspired development of a group of American women around a 100 years ago. It has ended up as one of the best traditions, both internationally and inter-denominationally, in the World Church! It arose from women who were practical and praying Christians when faced with the needs of the world - and especially of women and children in the mission field. Unlike many new movements it did not start with a clear vision of what it was to become eventually but slowly and organically developed over many years - and astonishingly!

Before the official start date, there was already a strong tradition in the United States of America and Canada among Christian women, of supporting with prayer the numerous boards for foreign and home missions which focussed on the needs of women and children. This developed into a commitment to communal, as well as personal prayer for this work and the need to have annual days and even weeks of prayer within denominations and an agreement that prayer should be both informed and lead to prayerful action.

The beginning was given the date of 1887, when the first joint National Day of Prayer for mission work was organised by the wife of a Presbyterian minister, Mrs Mary Ellen James, in Brooklyn, a poor area of New York. It included the confession of individual and national sins, and taking offerings that would fitly express contrition. The idea spread and other denominations joined in.

Right at its beginning, the Day aimed to do 2 things -

- (1) To reach out to God in confession (an element which has lapsed a bit.)
- (2) To reach out to the needy in generosity.

In 1890, two Baptist women visited the East and saw the need for women's education and literature and returned home to establish a day of united prayer for overseas mission. In 1910, to celebrate 50 years of progress, events were organised all over the USA which were an early example of ecumenical cooperation.

(3) Thus the 3rd principle was established - to reach out to mission across the world.

In 1922, the two national days of prayer, one in Canada and one in the USA, shared the same date and in 1926 a service that was distributed to some other countries got a big response and enthusiasm began to grow.

(4) The 4th principle was to organise it for churches of all denominations. In 1927, during a meeting of the International Missionary Council, it was confirmed that it should include many mission partners in all countries and that the theme should not only be on missionary work but all the concerns of the kingdom of God. In 1928 that decision was put into practice.

(5) Thus the 5th principle was to organise the Day internationally and

(6) the 6th principle was to involve all that it means to be a Christian and to listen to one another's services with the joy of a shared faith and with special attention to shared burdens for social justice so that we can then pray for one another with understanding.

These 6 principles are still held by those who organise the World Day Of Prayer. After various dates were tried, it is now always on the first Friday in March. NB. The posters notifying the time and place need to be out in January – in practice, designed by Christmas, as February is too late!

Word of the service soon spread via individuals meeting at conferences. sharing the information and going home to start organising it. A Scottish woman, Mrs Grace Forgan, heard about it at an international conference in Jerusalem in 1928 and in 1930 there was the first Day in Scotland and in England in 1932, Wales in 1933 and the Republic of Ireland in 1935 and Northern Ireland in 1943.

After World War 2, the movement grew dramatically. The International Committee, representing 7 regions the world, meets every 5 years to choose the countries and the Biblical themes and whatever else they need to discuss. The conviction grew that the service should bring together people of various ethnic traditions and cultures. The National Committees added Bible studies on the theme, and material for children and youth and a lot of information about the country. After two world wars, the connection between such

developments and confronting the ignorance and prejudices that can lead to warfare was not neglected. Various figures are available, but it appears that the work for the Day may be translated into 90 languages in 150 nations each one of which has a National Committee on which each denomination has its representative and which edits the work appropriately. In 2023, there were approximately 1800 services in the UK. Regional Days are held locally to encourage local organisers to have interesting services. A great deal of money is raised at the services across the world which is given to a range of carefully selected Christian charities.

When I returned from 14 years in Bangladesh, I was ashamed to see that, in the list at the back of the service leaflet, the Congregational Federation was the only denomination that did not have a representative so I volunteered – and discovered the level of commitment needed! There are 7 meetings a year most needing overnight accommodation (All expenses are paid.) I found my colleagues really interesting people, intelligent, creative and great fun and the work excellent and very demanding. I need to be several years younger so another CF volunteer would be warmly welcomed!

Last year's country to supply the service was Taiwan (a very challenging place) and this next March it is the Christian women of Palestine which is surely the most challenging of all.....In 2025, the service will come from the women of the Cook Islands where early missionary work was spread among the Pacific Islands by our own (Congregational) London Missionary Society - now incorporated into the Council for World Mission.

The standards and the level of excellence for this Day require a commitment that can be formidable! But how else could the results be so remarkable and lead to the interest and respect in which it is held?